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METAPHYSICS AS A BRANCH OF ART

METAPHYSICS is frequently called a science of first principles, a science of the nature of reality, a science of possible experience and so on. This paper tries to show that metaphysics, from the standpoint of its practical effect, might be classed more fitly as an art than as a science.

The chief distinction between art and science is here assumed to be this, that art is concerned with arousing emotion, and science with giving definite perceptions; that art deals with general ideas or abstractions, but science with particular facts. Taking first what we may call the consumer's standpoint in art and science, we have the consumer of art enjoying an esthetic consciousness, and the consumer of science being made acquainted with fact. It is quite generally agreed that the esthetic consciousness is essentially emotional, or at least affective, but it is by no means so indubitable that the learning of scientific facts is accompanied by a strong affective tone. Now, emotion is distinct from cognition by reason, I believe, of its relative vividness and vagueness, and the esthetic consciousness is more vivid, but at the same time more vague, than the scientific. By being more vivid I mean that the enjoyment of art is an excitable and very unstable condition of mind, that in it one may readily become exalted, enthusiastic and highly suggestible. A little art may accomplish more of this kind of thing than a good deal of science could. For instance, an army, even of savants, would be more inspired by singing 'Dixie' than by chanting Newton's laws of motion. Then, too, many of the arts—as music, dancing, sculpture, architecture—appeal so directly and inclusively to our motor apparatus that they can summon a wealth of muscular and tactual excitements, conducive to emotional intensity, which are usually at a minimum in the scientific consciousness. Indeed, the very fact that the artist must present the idea to 'sense' is a guarantee that a certain pitch of vividness is expected. The esthetic consciousness is vague in the sense that it turns loose a great deal of unapplied enthusiasm, it is exciting in a general way with no specific suggestion as to how that excitement is to be worked off. Art is stimulative without being essentially instructive.[1]

To illustrate this function of art, take the effect of Donohue's statue of young Sophocles. The erect head, open mouth and lifted chest suggest a full deep breath. The observer takes at once a full deep breath, and before long the elasticity, grace and freedom of the statue's pose have tempted along the observer's imitative impulse until he gets the most lively feeling of animation and buoyancy—a genuine emotion of joy. But at this point the statue stops. The emotion it has evoked must find expression somehow at some time, but the precise mode of expression depends not upon the statue but upon the observer. A musician may put his feeling into a martial melody, but a shoemaker will put it into his shoes. The point is that the statue, although it has had a palpable and literal effect, has not given any detailed instruction about music or shoes. It has conveyed only the very common, very general idea of animation or exaltation, but its beauty lies in the peculiar vivacity with which it gives that general notion. Compare with this the effect upon the layman of being told that deep breathing oxygenates the blood, and that this is a good thing. His conscious response to this is to do the thing which the statement itself suggests, to begin breathing deeply, and that for him is the end of the matter. The difference in the two cases seems to be this: The statue appears to the observer to presuppose nothing, but to be itself the starting-point of interest; the thing it does is to stimulate an instinctive reaction, and so to present the observer with a vivid emotion. It then becomes the observer's problem to work off that emotion. In the second case, the statement of fact does presuppose an interest in one's own physical well-being. It does not itself arouse emotion, but it guides the interest already there, and what one finally does about it is the thing itself, *i. e.*, deep breathing and consequent oxygenating of the blood. That art communicates general ideas and science particulars is illustrated, I think, in a comparison of Rodin's statue of Balzac,[2] in which only the face is treated in detail, with that which a scientific presentation of the visible man would have to be—say, a photograph. Rodin impresses us with a few traits of character, the photographer would impress us with every fold in Balzac's garments, every button on his shoes. Again, what a poet would call an illimitable sea, a scientist would call a body of water three thousand miles wide. Millet's pictures impress you with the dignity of work as well as the poverty of the worker, but they give you no statistics.

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[1] This statement of the function of art seems to me somewhat like Professor Fite's view expressed in the article 'Art, Industry and Science,' *Psychological Review*, Vol. VIII., pp. 128–144.

[2] *The World's Work*, November, 1905, p. 6821.

If we turn now to the standpoint of the producer in art and in science, a more intricate situation appears. But, though it is true that the scientist is moved by artistic impulse in the creation of his hypotheses and gets esthetic satisfaction out of his products, and though it is true that the artist proceeds with scientific precision to secure a definite effect, yet I believe that the final object remains perfectly distinct in the two cases. The ultimate aim of the scientist is always to convince some one, that of the artist to interest and move some one. The maxims of the two professions have opposite implications. The artist talks of greatest possible effect with fewest possible lines, of conveying much in little, of letting the observer's fancy supply details. The scientist, on the contrary, is advised to get little out of much, that is, to be lavish of facts and sparing of theory, to have a full supply of details and particulars for any generalization which he propounds. The artist's success depends upon whether he arouses interest; he does not care whether you believe his particulars. The scientist, however, stands or falls by his particular facts. If his facts are not facts, he is without honor, theorize he never so wisely. Science guarantees only definitely dated and located events, and is, therefore, essentially a statement of what has happened. That certain of these things will happen again, or will always happen, the scientist believes, but does not know. Prophecy is not his province, hence the statement of universally valid laws or of generalizations which anticipate experience, however expedient these may be, are not scientific.

Art, then, transmits abstractions and general concepts rather than particular facts, and it offers emotional effects which it tries to make vivid. Can the same thing be said of metaphysics? That metaphysics has to do with abstractions and general concepts seems a discreet assumption which requires no insistence, but that metaphysics is chiefly concerned with emotional excitement is not at once so obvious. My argument for this belief is, that the fundamental metaphysical categories correspond to typical motor attitudes, and the consciousness of these attitudes is the basis of emotion; and further, that the teachings of metaphysicians have no immediate result in overt action, but they do have an effect upon mood, sentiment or disposition.

To illustrate the connection between concepts and motor attitudes, imagine the case of a person trying to thread a needle. Suppose this person to try a few times to put his thread through the eye of the needle, and without success. The failure induces a reflective pause.

If now the first idea persists and the man concludes that one must be firm with the thread and make it go through, he may never succeed. But if the first plan is surrendered and he realizes that what he wants is not to do the thing in that particular way, but to do it in any way, then he has arrived at a conceptual view of the case. He has generalized his desire, or, in other words, has taken the transitional step towards some other means of attaining his end. The other means is slipping the needle over the thread. The concept of threading the needle corresponds to an attitude which is intermediate between the position of the body in putting the thread through the needle, and the position of the body in putting the needle around the thread. These two positions are, of course, quite similar; the head is held forward, the eyes fixed, both hands are held up and close together, each grasping an implement, and all these points common to the two positions are the connotation of the concept of doing the thing at all. The variable element of the action is a slight movement of the hands,—one either holds the right hand still and moves the left, or holds the left and moves the right. During the period of deliberation, while the concept is emerging, both hands are held still and one is simply in the general attitude of threading a needle. The concept means the attitude.

In metaphysics we do not thread needles, but, following Kant, we affirm, deny and limit, we unify, differentiate and integrate, we exist, cause and reciprocate, we have possibilities, actualities and necessities of action; or, with Hegel, we posit, negate and reconcile,—and in every case the significance of the category seems to me just a bodily attitude. I can not, for example, posit or affirm anything strongly without a tendency to face the source of the suggestion or at least to imagine it in front of me, without a feeling of clenched hands, a forward and downward motion of the head and a pushing out of the chest—which induces inspiration. Negation is a reversal of all this, an opening of hands as if to drop something, the impulse to turn away and the expiration of breath. An act of affirmation may, of course, take different particular forms: if some one asks for an instructive book to read and you walk over and set a book down with a thud on the table, that is literally a 'positing' of that book as instructive. Or an act of affirmation may be the mere utterance of 'yes.' In either case, however, something like the experience described above would be the kernel of the meaning. The meaning of unity and variety I should locate in the fundamental acts of contraction and expansion. The primitive organism preserves its integrity or oneness by shrinking together in the presence of a harmful stimulus; it varies its experience by expanding or by enlarging the number of points of contact with other things. In human consciousness it is the narrowing down of active range, or the touching of one's self, which intensifies the sense of personal identity or unity. I believe that the idea of unity always has this implication of tension towards a center, and that we comprehend unity in outside things by a literal contraction or huddling of ourselves together. Variety means turning in different directions, the impulses to movement are all away from any single fixed center, the gestures and whole attitude are expansive. Again, the category of substance as the supporter of experience, or substratum and background of all qualities, is no other than the concept of self. The idea of causality is the idea of substance doing something, of 'being' active. The meaning of the idea depends upon the experience of our own bodies doing things. It is commonly enough realized that we can not understand the people about unless we identify our selves and activities with their selves and activities, we must try to put ourselves in their place. The same thing is true of the inanimate part of our surroundings; we understand the hardness of iron by flexing our muscles and trying to be as rigid as iron, that is, by trying to support what it will support, or we see better what the force of steam is by trying to push the things it can push. It is through an attitude and activity of the self that we can put an ultimate meaning into things and events. Take finally the categories of modality. They become apparent in the facial and bodily changes which occur as, say, the state of conviction settles down upon one. The realization of a thing as a mere possibility comes with an attentive, expectant facial expression and hesitant, tentative movements and gestures. The realization of the actual is a normal, poised, relatively placid condition. The realization of necessity brings a certain feeling of fatalistic rigidity, a sense of being knocked down and hopeless. These three types of expression appear in some works of art. The sensitive and subtle delicacy of Botticelli's faces expresses a life fed upon mere possibilities of experience, Greek statues show people who dealt with the actual, who had give-and-take relations with reality, and some of Rembrandt's faces and Millet's figures express the sense of the inevitable. A facial expression and an internal qualm or so may seem like a trivial significance for a concept like necessity or actuality or possibility, but when I try to understand what mere unqualified possibility may be, or what pure actuality is, or what unity and variety in the abstract are, or what sheer unpolluted affirmation amounts to, I confess that to find some genuine bodily attitude seems to me to be doing pretty well.

The connection between motor attitudes and emotion is familiar from the work of Darwin, James, Lange and Dewey. If, then, it were allowed that the categories stand for motor attitudes, we should expect that the function performed by the basal concepts of the understanding would coincide with the results of these attitudes. These results are, for consciousness, the generation or the emphasis of certain sentiments and emotions. The second part of the statement made above was that metaphysical doctrines made no difference immediately for overt action, but that they did make a difference in sentiment, mood or disposition. For example, the insistence upon negation in general, upon the value of sacrifice, rejection and denial tends to promote Stoic temperament, whereas to enlarge upon the importance of affirmation, of agreement, acceptance is to encourage the Epicurean disposition. The familiar gibe that one's philosophy depends upon the digestion, suggests the remark that the digestion may be influenced by one's philosophy. Both ways of stating the connection are true, the metaphysical system which expresses its author's disposition takes its effect out in the moods and sentiments of the reader. A temperamental difference between the Oriental and the Occidental mind is reflected in the relative valuation which these peoples put on the categories of passivity and activity, and that difference is reinforced by the working out of these concepts in religious and metaphysical systems. Finally, following the pragmatic method, let us ask of one or two metaphysical doctrines, What difference do they make? What shall one do about them? Augustine taught that since we doubt we must exist. What shall be done about it? There is no question that Augustine's teaching had influence, that his argument is interesting and even exciting, but its value is an emotional one. It is entertaining and agreeable to feel that the conscious individual has a pretty important part to play, this feeling may serve to transfer interest from one sphere of phenomena to another and possibly to induce investigation of psychical laws, but its suggestiveness for present action is not assignable. Or take Kant's prescription of 'simple conformity to law in general.' What result would that have upon overt action? Some result at some time, of course, but nothing that we can immediately indicate. What one does get from the metaphysic of ethics is very much the same effect that comes from Prometheus Bound, the book of Job or Michelangelo's Moses,—a sense of intolerable but inevitable law. Metaphysics, then, like the work of art, gives an impression which is often vivid and interesting, but which is emotional and purely general. The truths of art and of metaphysics are felt truths, but are not facts which have at any time been demonstrated.

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